

To Adult Children: How to Break Your Codependency with Your Narcissistic Parents

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### **Abstract**

In an attempt to give treatment advice to codependent adult children (CACs), terms, academic literature, collective thoughts, and the relationship with narcissistic parents are explored. It appears that controlling and manipulative parents, a child's lack of asking for help outside the dysfunctional family, and a lack of properly reflecting on one's life are what led some to become codependent adult children. These behaviors would suggest that the CAC needs to address the codependent relationship by working on themselves first. Furthermore, this arrested development could be seen as a type of learned helplessness that could be broken away from by increasing the frequency of rewards when the adult child explores life outside the codependent relationship. Social interactions could provide this reward with talk therapy probably being the easiest way to ensure frequency and reward. The guidelines provided for Cognitive Behavior Therapy, successful treatments for *hikikomori* (extremely codependent adult children), and a successful treatment in internet addiction suggest 8 to 12 weekly sessions of talk therapy that gives the CAC space to reflect on their life story and true desires without judgment from the therapist could heal them of their dysfunctional personality or at least have them start to initiate and want to initiate the right actions to break them of their codependency with their narcissistic parents.

*Keywords:* Adult children, Codependent, Narcissistic parent, Hikikomori, Psychotherapy, Talk therapy, Reflective Listening, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Carl Rogers, Stephen Covey

### **Main Body**

To give analysis and clarity, I'll be relying on academic literature and the collective thoughts (even if such collective thoughts cite academic literature at times) in regard to adult children, codependency, narcissistic parents, and other terms. For collective thoughts (or at least popular thoughts on the issue), I'll be relying on *Wikipedia*, *Urban Dictionary*, and *Reddit*. In *Wikipedia*, the articles are constantly being edited and those edits are being reviewed, challenged, and changed by a large number of people. This suggests that the most current version of the writings would most likely represent the collective thoughts on the topics. *Urban Dictionary* and *Reddit* rely on up voting by a mass of people. That would imply that the one with the most upvotes is the best representation of the collective opinion out there. (Unfortunately, many of the *Reddit* forums I expected to find material had little. These included: r/Codependency, r/AdultChildren, and r/ACOA.)

### **Terms**

"Adult Child" is a term that pretty much defines itself: a grownup who doesn't want to grow up. However, given it is an emerging term from our culture perhaps a consensus on the definition is more appropriate. According to the most up voted definition on *Urban Dictionary*, an adult child is someone 25 years or older who doesn't have any interest in joining the real world. They often live at home for little or no rent, free of any real responsibility. Given the harsh, cold, and even cruel definitions often found on *Urban Dictionary*, it surprisingly goes on to have some sympathy by saying that they are not necessarily bad people and are often the product of how they were raised. However, it then goes on to write them off by saying that they'll probably never find a mate (or have a dysfunctional one if they do), are lazy, will have depression, will be obese, smell, implies that they'll never have a job, and states that they'll probably live at home until they're 50 ("Adult Child," n.d.).

Given that even *Urban Dictionary* puts at least some blame on the parents (or on those that raised the individual), it might be of interest to see the definition given by an institution designed to

handle such situations. Adult Children of Alcoholics/Dysfunctional Families (ACOA) is an organization that treats “adult children of alcoholics, codependents, and addicts of various sorts.” According to ACOA, “[t]he term ‘adult child’ is used to describe adults who grew up in alcoholic or dysfunctional homes and who exhibit identifiable traits that reveal past abuse or neglect.” The organization’s definition and its own name seem to imply that dysfunctional parents without alcohol use are just as bad as alcoholic ones and that these parents are at least somewhat to blame for and might have a direct correlation with adult children. Furthermore, they seem to imply that adult children are linked to codependent relationships.

“Codependency” has a grassroots origin as well. However, it appears to be more accepted by the academic literature. It started out as describing alcoholics who were dependent on others to enable their behavior. However, it has grown to a broader but still controversial definition of those in a dysfunctional relationship where one person supports or enables another person’s addiction, immaturity, irresponsibility, or under-achievement (“Codependency,” n.d.). While the term codependency describes the relationship, it isn’t entirely clear who the codependent is. Is it the person with the addiction and/or immaturity or the person who enables them? Looking at the prefix, “co” means to go together or complement each other. The term “coed” means both sexes as they complement each other in creating life. “Cooperate” means to operate together with someone. “Correlate” means items have some type of link to each other. So the term “codependents” would suggest their dependence or dysfunction complements and are linked to the other’s. Thus, in codependency, both the enabling adult and the dysfunctional adult child should be considered codependents. They are just different types of codependents in a codependent relationship, just as in coed sports and coed dorms you have both male and female.

(While many might know that the plural term of coed often refers to female students, it seems to have come out of laziness and lack of understanding of the word. When Universities started to become coed, people thought that the definition meant “allows females” and not the proper definition of “mixed sexes.” Thus, they started to call female students coeds for short.)

So, clearly, the adult child is a codependent. But the parent can also be called a codependent. As such, I'll refer to these adult children for clarity of terms the codependent adult child or “CAC” for short. Still, both origin terms of CAC (adult child and codependent) suggests the need for a dysfunctional other or some type of enabling figure while the individual is emerging into adulthood.

One such dysfunctional figure could be the narcissistic parent. They are defined as parents that are “exclusively and possessively close to their children and may be especially envious of, and threatened by, their child’s growing independence” and that the child would be “considered to exist solely to fulfill the parent’s wishes and needs.” They are even described as seeing the child as their puppet which they control with emotional abuse (“Narcissistic parent,” n.d.). The definition suggests that they would never allow their children, even their adult children, to truly grow up and achieve independence as it would be a threat to their control over them.

The term “narcissistic parent” comes from the term “narcissistic personality disorder” (NPD). NPD is characterized by exaggerated feelings of self-importance, lack of empathy, spending much of their time worried about their appearance, and often taking advantage of the people around them (“Narcissistic personality disorder,” n.d.).

Such definitions of narcissism hints that the narcissistic parent would not only try to control their child for their own ends but do so discretely as to avoid being labeled as a narcissistic (bad) parent. Academic literature on the subject states that the child is a reflection of them and that reflection better be perfect. “[T]he narcissist does not exist without a reflection—and that reflection better be flawless [...]

The parent's emotional needs are met by appearing perfect; they will spend their lives striving for superiority in order to mask their deep feelings of inferiority" (McLarnan, n.d.). Again, since the parent's reputation better be perfect as well, it suggests that all manipulation done by the narcissistic parent will always be done so that others, perhaps even the adult child, may never know. "A true narcissist stays off the radar; in fact they are model citizens [...]" (McLarnan, n.d.). Such manipulative actions towards the child's life, especially discretely, might cause them to stop developing properly.

That brings us to our last term "arrested development." Though, it has been rejected by the medical community in favor of "developmental disorder." Yet, this other term seems to consist mostly of genetic disorders. Arrested development, however, seems to imply an environmental cause. I think the TV show *Arrested Development* would best give the collective's thought on the term (even all of Urban Dictionary's definitions only talked about the television show). The show is about a rich family, but the parents are manipulative, controlling, and emotionally abusive towards their children. They are clearly narcissistic parents. And all the children seem to have suffered developmentally from it. Either they too became a narcissist or became overly dependent on and attached to their parents. They all seem to be in different states of arrested development. They all stopped maturing before becoming true adults. Thus, we can describe arrested development as mental development that stops short of complete maturity or shoots off into some type of dysfunctional personality type. Given this understanding of the term, it would be fitting to say all codependent adult children are in some type of arrested development.

The main character of the show and one of the sons of the narcissistic parents seems to be the most normal of them all. He is referred to by reviewers as the straight man as he tries to do the right thing, though he too has dysfunctional behaviors like trying to subtly control his son, not taking into account his son's emotions, and having a lack of boundaries with him ("Michael Bluth," n.d.a). However,

the main character's dysfunctional behaviors are nowhere near the level of the other characters. And, his character is the only one to have suffered a great and prolonged loss emotionally. His wife passed away before the start of the show but not before having to watch her be in a coma for several months ("Michael Bluth," n.d.b). Though the main character was described as hardworking and honest even when young, it seems like the writers intuitively knew there had to be some type of growth process, especially a painful one, that caused him to reflect on his life to justify his different personality and maturity on the show compared to his sibling's extreme dysfunction and codependency.

But in the real world does such a clear link between narcissistic parental and codependency exist?

### **Link**

While the terms of codependency, adult children, and narcissistic parents, are pretty well defined and accepted by the masses, is there a link between them? The collective thoughts on Wikipedia suggest that there is. In the 'Children of narcissists' subsection of 'Narcissistic parent' wiki page, it describes the adult child: due to the manipulation of the narcissistic parent, the child's feelings are repressed locking them into arrested development and making them codependent ("Narcissistic parent," n.d.). While the editors of Wikipedia seem to be in agreement with this at the moment, they only cite pretty much one source. And that source comes from one article from the personal website of an educational doctorate. Many other experts who write about it do so as if it is a matter of fact. While the experts out there seem to be in agreement, does the academic literature support the link between the narcissistic parent and CACs?

Indeed, studies show that narcissistic parents (at least the behaviors expected to come from a narcissistic parent) are linked to codependent children. A review of the academic literature showed that codependent children seem to come from parental coercion, maternal compulsion, dysfunctional

parenting, repressive family atmosphere, physical and verbal abuses, authoritarian parenting style, lack of communication, and enmeshment (lack of clear boundaries and family roles) (Cullen & Carr, 1999).

Interestingly, the study showed there was a lack of correlation between codependency and major traumatic childhood experiences or drug or alcohol abuse with parents. Thus, the evidence suggests that codependent adult children seem to be exclusively, or at least mostly, linked to parental manipulation and control, especially if done abusively but not to the point of causing major traumatic events. This agrees with the prior definitions as a major traumatic event wouldn't only look bad on the parent but might motivate the child to do something about the situation and claim their independence, what the narcissistic parent fears the most.

However, not every child of a narcissistic parent becomes a codependent adult child. This would suggest some type of behavior or personality dysfunctionality on part of the child to finish establishing the codependent relationship. While no academic paper I know of explores this aspect, the study above suggested a link of children who tend to avoid seeking help and codependency. This would be an excellent explanation of why some children become victims of the narcissistic parent and some don't. The child growing up would lack resources to escape the control of their parents unless they got help from an outside source and the sooner they escaped the less likely would they be under the growing emotional bondage and manipulative ideas of their parents.

But, overall, there appears to be a clear link between narcissistic parents and codependent adult children.

### **Breaking Codependency**

Stephen Covey, the author of probably the most popular self-help book of all time, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, stated the importance of moving from *dependence* to *independence* and finally to *interdependence*. He also states that one must first move from dependence to



independence *before* moving to interdependence (synergy and maturity with those around you). And independence is something not allowed as when the child “begins to develop a unique, and separate identity, their opinions, and healthy need for individuation causes the [narcissistic] parent to feel threatened, and rejected” (McLarnan, n.d.). The CAC will never be granted real independence and never be allowed to be a fully functioning adult. Thus, they will never experience their true selves until they can break away from this dysfunctional relationship. Breaking the bond and self-reliance is the only way to move out of arrested development. To do this, Covey states that one must work from the inside-out. The three habits that help one move from dependence to independence, inside work, are to *Be Proactive, Begin with the End in Mind, and Put First Things First*.

By not addressing his or her current dysfunctional situation living with their parents at such a late age, the CACs will probably end up doing busy work and/or entertaining activities which blind him or her from knowing what needs to be done to break away from the situation. By not knowing what they want from life, they cannot prioritize it, and, thus, cannot be proactive about it. Instead, one just stays at home doing essentially nothing. Covey’s suggestion that you must do the inner work to move to independence seems to be in alignment with codependent adult children staying dependent. Later in his life, Covey wrote that taking on an outside problem (like your relationship with your narcissistic parents) appears to be the best way to start on the inside-out work. In other words, by analyzing what you can do about the problem on your side it provides the best opportunity for you to reflect on your own behaviors that allowed it and how you can now stop it. Thus, your dysfunctional parents might be the perfect opportunity to start working on yourself. But for now, let’s look at what the academic literature has to say about breaking codependency.

Given what we know about codependent adult children, it can be seen as a form of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is when one feels helpless to whatever pain or pleasure comes their

way in a situation and thus they do nothing about it. One study, where the term learned helplessness came from, repeatedly shocked dogs through a platform. One group of dogs could press a button to stop the shock. Another group of dogs could do nothing to stop the shock. Later, when they were given a new and only option of jumping through a hole to get away from the platform, the dogs that had learned they had the power to stop the shock would jump to the safe platform. The dogs who previously couldn't stop the shock wouldn't even try to jump away. It was, well, shocking to researchers as the dogs clearly now had a way to avoid being shocked but did nothing. It's like the dog assumed the platform on the other side of the hole would shock them as well. Since they were no longer willing to explore (learned helplessness), they never realized they could now prevent themselves from being in pain (Seligman & Maier, 1967). Even with their adult status, the codependent adult child has learned at a young age (given the virtually absolute power the parents had over them as children) that they will always be controlled by their narcissistic parents through subtle manipulation and emotional abuse. They learn to "stay put," dependent on them for support, and "be a good boy."

However, the modern literature shows that frequency of reward (that does not necessarily mean the average, per se) or lack of it is what determines if an individual will become helpless or be able to break away from learned helplessness (Teodorescu & Erev, 2014). For example, if a game, by chance, doesn't reward a player for their efforts enough (even though the programmed average should have rewarded them more and would reward them more often if they kept at it) or if the rewards are too far spread out, they are very likely to stop playing. However, if a game rewards a player frequently for their efforts, they are very likely to continue playing. Not surprising at all. However, when the latter group is first yoked (essentially, given absence of control like the dogs), they are able to break away from learned helplessness with frequent rewards from exploring. Overall, it showed the frequency of reward was the best predictor of more exploratory behavior when compared to other factors, even when compared to perceived control. True to this study, Seligman's yoked dogs didn't try jumping platforms to avoid the

electric shocks until an assistant physically moved them (reward from exploration) *several* times in a row (frequency) to show that they could avoid the pain now by jumping away.

But learned helplessness can also come from the reward/pleasure itself. For example, if someone gets rewards that they haven't earned and doesn't get rewards that they have earned, they learn to be helpless to the situation (Brooks, 2012). They learn they have no control over life's rewards/pleasures and decide to do nothing about it. The parent who provides for the adult child regardless of the child's actions might be serving to help to create their child's dependent nature. So not only does any unpredictable emotional abuse that the narcissistic parent gives the child because they didn't meet their unreasonable expectations help to create learned helplessness but so does manipulative rewards. For example, providing him or her physical rewards they did not earn (e.g. tasty food, shelter, video games, etc.) to keep them home and denying status rewards they did earn (e.g. parents breaking their end of a promise of helping the child to get a car or a place of their own after graduating) so they can't move away can create that learned helplessness in the child. And the offspring has little reason to explore outside the home for bigger rewards, like a car, because the child won't get that reward on their own without a lot of time and a lot of work (i.e. the reward is too infrequent). Given this dysfunctional situation, it suggests the child has to get *greatly* satisfying rewards of their *own* efforts *outside* the narcissistic parental relationship, *frequently*, to break away. That sounds like a tall order. Essentially, the narcissistic parent intuitively knows how to keep the child "helpless" at home and dependent on them. But, unlike a dog, you can use information to stop staying put.

So what is the fulfilling reward that can be frequently earned by the CACs to break them away from their codependency with their narcissistic parents and learned helplessness? Talking. Talking to someone outside the dysfunctional relationship can be the frequent reward one needs. Talking to a friend or someone who will genuinely listen about your life lights up the reward center of the brain,

even when talking about painful memories (Semerdjiev, n.d.; Sachs, Damasio, & Habibi, 2015). This will teach the CAC to start reaching out for help instead of relying on their controlling parents or pursuing lower level rewards like playing video games. Furthermore, talking about our lives helps us to process the events in our past and our current situation. This processing is never allowed with the narcissistic parent. “The echo child [the child striving to be a good and perfect reflection of their narcissistic parent] learns, the hard way, to keep their feelings, problems, mistakes, questions, and opinions to themselves, or face severe disapproval, rejection and punishment from their narcissistic parent.” And talking to the narcissistic parent about serious issues might do more harm than good as they might take that vulnerable moment to inject bad ideas into the CAC’s head. But talking to those outside the dysfunctional relationship and who are right-minded can also help us rewrite bad programming or scripts we hold onto from our narcissistic parents. The prolonged success of psychotherapy (talk therapy) seems to support this (Carr, 2007). It also helps with the inner work. By forcing the individual to put their thoughts to words and coherent sentences, it helps the individual to figure out what they really want in life (*Begin with the End in Mind*) and to prioritize their actions for the day and their life (*Put First Things First*). That only leaves the last part up to the codependent adult child: start doing what needs to be done (*Be Proactive*), which will probably be easier once they know what it is they want out of life.

But if talking itself is rewarding, perhaps there are other ways to get it without therapy that will also motivate the CAC to get away from the parents. Keep in mind, we are social creatures. We crave meaningful social interaction. The reward part of the brain is wired for it (Bhanji & Delgado, 2013). For example, the pleasure center of our brain lights up more if we spend our *own* money on a friend rather than someone else’s as long as it results in more interaction with that friend (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2014). Keep in mind, we could keep our money and still spend more time and money on our friends, but our desire to give and help others is that strong. We are social creatures. And the more isolated we become the more we crave social interactions and that desire might manifest in dysfunctional ways. This

could explain the rise of the pickup culture (a subculture that gives advice to men on how to be with a woman, despite the fact men have been successfully doing it without such advice for the entire history of mankind before the information age, but it does so to the point of using or even abusing women) as people want to connect, especially with the opposite sex. However, as modern people find themselves more isolated from the communal living we evolved from by being in rural and suburb areas and using only technology instead of social interactions as entertainment it becomes harder to know how to communicate with people, much less the opposite sex. Perhaps the codependent adult child can go to a social gathering to get that rewarding experience and social training. But if the codependent adult child goes to the bar or nightclub alone (assuming they have no friends to go with) and fails to get any rewarding social interaction, instead he is stressed, sadden, tired, and depressed from the lack of *meaningful* social interactions that night, then he or she is likely to over time, because of the lack of frequent reward, give up and stay home at their parents. At least at their parents' they can have more control over their situation and get other rewards more frequently (like playing their favorite video games, eating their favorite foods, or watching movies). However, as social creatures, those rewards can't compare to social interaction. This could explain the emptiness experienced by many CACs. In regards to codependency, adult children who spend their entire lives playing video games and watching TV and isolating themselves from social interactions would make for an excellent study.

*Hikikomori*, adult children who live entirely in their room using technology as entertainment as their parents enable them to do so (e.g. bring food to them, do their laundry, etc.), would clearly be seen as an extreme form of codependent adult children. Most believe hikikomori is the result of a child crumbling underneath the extreme pressure of Asian societies and parents wanting them to be successful. This is similar to how the narcissistic parents want their child to be perfect. While most of the literature argues about what the true cause of hikikomori is, few studies address effective treatment. One study that does notes a jogging treatment they believe to have cured a hikikomori (Nishida, Kikuchi,

Fukuda, & Kato, 2015). They were even able to show measurable changes in the brain before and after treatment. However, the study notes that for each jogging session he would meet with the same instructor. They met 3 times a week, jogging for 30 minutes around the University athletic grounds. In total, it was about 14 weeks or 42 times that they jogged together. After several sessions (frequency) and interacting with and probably opening up about his life to the clinician (reward), he decided to get a job and move out of his parent's house. While exercise is certainly beneficial to the brain, especially in regards to depression (Phillips, 2017), I believe it was the social interaction and the possible talk therapy where the real healing took place. And talk therapy itself, especially when talking about emotional events, has also been shown to change the structure and activity of the brain (Moustafa, 2013).

You have to ask yourself what is going to be more rewarding, finding a person you can talk to in confidence so that you can easily and repeatedly open up to him or her about things in your life, or going to a bar where you *might* find some stranger to talk to that is probably drunk and who you will probably never see again? Sure, the CAC could go to social outings and group activities that don't involve alcohol or drugs; however, it was most likely the *lack* of social skills that allowed them to become an adult child from their narcissistic parents' behavior in the first place. That means he or she is very unlikely to be able to find a friend at such group activities or sustain a meaningful relationship. Again, talk therapy with a professional who will listen is probably a better approach. Since the hikikomori are seen as the worst case of codependent adult children, let's keep looking in the literature for treatments.

In another study looking to find the root cause of hikikomori, it took a novel approach. They talked one-on-one to individuals from a small but very accurate sample size. They talked to the hikikomori in such a way that allowed them to open up about their condition on their own terms, even if that meant having multiple sessions and even if it had to last for hours before they talked about being

hikikomori (Yong & Kaneko, 2016). This informal, indirect interview made a big difference in how they interacted with them as the study noted: “All the informants claimed that this was the first time they had told their stories to others.”

By using open, non-directional questions and keeping the setting informal, it encouraged “the informants to talk freely about their experiences without any restrictions.” They would also use caring questions like, “How are you feeling?” In addition to this, they made sure to have the informant’s answers “repeated back to them to encourage them to ponder on their thoughts and to share further.” For example, “Hikikomori: Society says what is good and what is not [...] so if you can’t go with [society’s] flow, you are the evil one... Interviewer: But I thought you said you didn’t see yourself as a bad person? Hikikomori: Sure I’m not, but in the eyes of society I am, because I think too differently to be able to go with the others.” This created a non-judgmental mirror and showed that the interviewer was testing their understanding.

While it is interesting to note that the hikikomori said they felt their lifestyle wasn’t an option but their only choice, even more interesting is the fact that, and what was *not* the purpose of the study, it caused a male hikikomori to heal. Of the 8 selected for in-depth interviews (some hikikomori, some former hikikomori, and some with a hikikomori relative), 4 were male. Of the 4 only 3 were currently hikikomori. True to their nature, they did not do face-to-face interviews. Of the 3, one only had 3 email exchanges, one had a significant amount of interaction (12 Skype chats, lasting 2-8 hours), and the last had 3 combined social interactions (a 10-minute Skype call, 2 Skype chats). Given what we know, it was probably the hikikomori who had the 12 long Skype chats who recovered as it re-enforces the idea of frequent reward from repeated social interactions, space to explore your own ideas, and time to reflect on one’s life. “[H]e revealed that apparently the unstructured interviews had allowed him to review what happened to him in the past. In doing so, he discovered what he really wanted and decided to

move on. [...] The dialogue helped him to reflect on himself and this helped him to decide what to do next.”

Carl Rogers, one of the most influential psychotherapists of his time, wouldn't be surprised at the result. If one were to watch one of his therapy sessions, it would be clear that he isn't pushy at all, allows the patient to open up at their own pace, and allows them to come to their own conclusions. And at the heart of his person-centered therapy is reflective listening which requires *empathic listening* and *testing understanding* (Arnold, 2014), something we would expect a good friend to do. This hikikomori study seemed to have accidentally used Carl Roger's most powerful weapon as a psychologist. It's no mistake that the literature in the field recommends something similar when it comes to healing children of narcissistic parents: “a healthy, truthful mirror of the client's inherent beauty that is not based on what they do, but who they are” (McLarnan, n.d.).

But will what worked for the hikikomori work for the codependent adult child in the western world? The hikikomori study points out a striking amount of similarities between hikikomori and CACs with narcissistic parents. The informants felt “powerless to change,” “they could see no way out,” and “feelings of being helpless in the world” (learned helplessness); reported difficulty coping with the real world, like job demands, and seeing the world as a harsh place thus having to stay home to make it (codependency); limited social abilities and no relationship with others besides parents (no outside person to ask for help); their own analysis of the academic literature showed “post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of parenting style” but not necessarily a traumatic event (dysfunctional parenting, repressive family atmosphere, physical and verbal abuses, authoritarian parenting style, and/or enmeshment); that it develops from environmental and personal factors, *not* from genetic mental illness (arrested development); it has been associated with maternal panic disorder (maternal compulsion); and “introverted personality plays a crucial role in a person becoming a hikikomori” (lack of



communication). The western CAC with narcissistic parents and the eastern hikikomori are the same person. The hikikomori simply manifests their dysfunction in an easier to spot situation (not leaving their rooms). But most importantly, the hikikomori study showed that codependent adult children, even in extreme cases, can be cured with talk therapy. It just needs time and space. They can be healed by “introducing a relaxed social environment that [they] can control” and just by getting to know them, which allows them to get to know themselves. In other words, introduce “talking sessions that allow hikikomori to express themselves freely with the goal of facilitating self-reflection” (Yong & Kaneko, 2016).

The codependent adult child must examine their personal story at their own pace if they are to grow. They must look inside. To change, they must be given something controlling parents would never allow. A child, even an adult one, must be allowed to come to their *own* realizations about their life. And one of those realizations is that it’s okay to make mistakes. “The [child’s] beauty is flawed, imperfect, and prone to all sorts of mistakes, and miss-steps; but these are to be accepted, and learned from, not feared. That is the truth that will finally set the echo child free” (McLarnan, n.d.). And we see a remarkable decrease in learned helplessness when making mistakes and learning from those mistakes are accepted and encouraged in a low reward environment, especially in the presence of good leadership (Boichuk, 2014). But good leadership can become even worse than bad leadership overtime for learned helplessness when mistakes aren’t allowed. Perhaps it becomes a situation where the leaders are simply seen as superior and it can’t be helped. But allowing for mistakes and encouraging learning from them gives people room to grow, mature, and become independent. So while having ideal role model parents *might* be good for the child, even better, and perhaps necessary, are parents who are okay with their child making mistakes and learning from them on their own. It’s a type of unconditional love and independence the codependent adult child with narcissistic parents has never really known.

And it's been shown that the parent's failure mindset—whether mistakes are seen as unacceptable or good learning opportunities—determines if the child will have a fixed or the highly coveted growth mindset (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). It's the whole praising for ability (being perfect from the start) or praising for effort (encouraging improving with time) that plays a key role in whether the child gets better at something (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). And we all know which group the narcissistic parent falls into. But you can rewrite that script in your head. Don't demand perfection from yourself at the start like your parents did. Tell yourself that you *can* improve with time and with proper treatment you will.

### **Treatment**

But how much time and space is needed for the codependent adult child to find their own answers to life and improve their situation? While many therapists in the field would probably give the blanket response that each individual is unique, I think we can give the CAC a reasonable range of time to expect to improve their situation.

Before I give an answer let's address another topic: technology. Just how hikikomori came about with the rise in technology, I think the increased usage of the terms "adult children" and "emerging adulthood" with the information age is no coincidence. With Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, smartphones ("there's an app for that"), and other entertaining Internet of Things devices, who would want to leave the comfort of their parent's house and live in the real world? While not the cause of codependency, modern technology allows the adult child to deny their actual circumstances by escaping reality. This hinders self-reflection and prevents them from finding frequent rewards *outside* the codependent relationship, and, thus, prolongs their codependent state.

(Not only has modern technology (smartphones, tablets, etc.) and screen time in general been disturbingly linked to a massive increase in social isolation, depression, and suicide but social media, at

least in regards to Facebook, has been shown to *cause* unhappiness (Twenge, 2017). Thus, seeking therapy for internet addiction for the CACs who need it would probably also be a good idea.)

One study looking to treat internet addiction used Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT, therapy where they talk about their behaviors and thoughts) saw success after 12 weekly sessions (Young, 2007). The vast majority of them were actually cured in 8 weeks but a little bit more were cured in 12. After a 6 month follow-up, just about everyone stayed cured. The study said it chose 12 weekly sessions as that is how long CBT usually takes to work. Specifically, it said: “CBT usually requires three months of treatment or approximately 12 weekly sessions.” This aligns very well with our hikikomori studies (12 Skype sessions and 14 weeks jogging/talking with a clinician).

And in treating codependent adult children (absent the presence of mental illness or drug addiction) 8 to 12 weeks (2 to 3 months) is probably a reasonable range of time needed. So that means you can’t just go to 3 sessions and expect to be cured or even to see progress by then. Change is a process. While long, the codependent adult should be happy to know it should only take one summer, not years, to change their situation for the better.

However, in choosing a therapist, regardless if they use person-centered therapy or CBT, it is important to find one that gives you space to explore your own thoughts and feelings. It isn’t simply the frequent reward of being able to converse with someone we are going for but also the ability to get some perspective on your current, dysfunctional living situation. And the only one who can really find that perspective, the only one who has lived in your shoes, is you. So if someone is pushing techniques or psychological tools on you (e.g. meditation, visualization, etc.), while they might be of some help, they often just serves to keep you from getting to the root of your problem. Unfortunately, some psychologists only care about how many sessions (money) they can get out of you.

## **Friends**

If one simply needs multiple talking sessions with someone who is patient and understanding, couldn't a friend fit the bill? If the friend doesn't have an agenda, like narcissistic parents do, absolutely. However, keep in mind, the child most likely became a codependent adult child, unlike their siblings, because they had little or no friends to turn to for help in regards to their relationship with their narcissistic parents. While they might have friends or many friends (for example, on social media), they probably lack *quality* friends. Many define quality friends as those they can open up to about intimate issues. Quality friends are also a critical factor in life satisfaction (Gillespie, Lever, Frederick, & Royce, 2015). Furthermore, it appears to be harder to make friends the older we get. These are *adult* children we are talking about here. And it is probably their lifelong lack of social skills that kept them from getting friends and keeps them in their room without friends.

Essentially, we have a negative feedback loop (a system that returns you back to where you were, e.g. a codependent adult child). To develop social skills, one needs to be social. The few times they get the courage to be social, they fail. Their lack of rewards/success in being social causes them to suffer or reinforce learned helplessness and to return to their room dependent on their parents. This all adds to the idea that they can never win in the real world and should just give up.

To break this cycle, a new cycle needs to be introduced. We need a positive feedback loop (a system that causes growth/change). By seeing a good therapist weekly, they are regularly rewarded when it comes to opening up about their past. They practice talking to another human being besides their parents or immediate family while sorting out their current situation. It could also help them to realize the best path to start making quality friendships, such as starting a new job or finding a group activity they have a high interest in.

Either that or you can wait for, as what happened to the main character on the TV show *Arrested Development*, some painful catalyst to force change on you (and chances are it will happen

eventually). Not only will it be painful but the event could emotionally scar you for life. I think a wise person would choose to be proactive instead and seek for a positive feedback loop right now.

### **Alternatives**

Besides having a friend to talk to are there any good alternatives to one-on-one therapy? As long as frequent reward and time and space to talk about one's life situation are given, yes, there are alternatives. One thought is group therapy. We know cathartic experiences, like opening up about our past, is rewarding to our brain, but listening other people's stories that we can relate to is also cathartic (Semerdjiev, n.d.) and, thus, rewarding. So listening to other people's abusive stories about narcissistic parents will be, oddly enough, beneficial to the CAC. But one wouldn't expect there to be a group for codependent adult children like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Actually, there is. As mentioned earlier, Adult Children of Alcoholics/Dysfunctional Families has group therapy sessions and a 12 step program similar to AA. However, as I also said before, be careful if they spend most of their time pushing their techniques or psychological tools on you. What you need are people to help you sort out your life by listening to you, showing empathy, being understanding, and *not* manipulating you like your parents do. As each group pretty much runs independently while having to follow a few guidelines (think Toastmasters), you might have to go to several before you find one that clicks (similar to finding a good therapist).

With the internet, it is possible to find therapists you can talk to on the phone or over the computer using apps like Skype, Talkspace, or BetterHelp. While there do seem to be some additional benefits with face-to-face interactions you won't find on phone calls or on instant messenger (again, we are social creatures), something is better than nothing. And a phone call or even just texting might be enough to make a difference. Remember, a hikikomori healed just by doing 12 long instant messaging chats about his life.

Now, there might be a co-worker, mentor, neighbor, or someone you already know that could lend an ear. However, getting that *frequent* reward by making sure you talk to them often enough would be hard to guarantee. Again, it's probably best to seek a professional, a professional group, or something with more structure to break you out of your codependency.

Finally, one can journal. While it is probably best to do journaling in *supplement* to any of the treatments above (once again, we are social creatures; thus, you probably need someone to listen to your explanations for you to best reflect on them), it is still better than nothing. Journaling does seem to be rewarding to people, helps them to handle stress, and there seems to be a lot of other benefits in regards to journaling (Grate, 2015). But most important of all for the CAC, journaling helps us to process current events and get perspective on their life. And reflective journaling will most likely help you to create a growth mindset (Korstange, 2016). Finally, journaling was used along with the CBT in the Internet Addiction study that resulted in a successful treatment (Young, 2007).

### **Communication**

I have a theory: the more you communicate with people (about your personal life) the more likely you are to ask for help and sort stuff out. If this is true, then the victims of narcissistic parents are most likely the children that communicated the least. (Remember, introversion was a critical factor if someone became a hikikomori or not.) Whether it's because you are shy or have an introverted personality, it doesn't really matter. The important thing is that you start communicating more with people besides your parents. Communication is a skill. And like any skill, the more you do it the more you will improve at it. Take on that growth mindset. And communication can come in a lot of forms nowadays. It could be a phone call, a text message, an online group, or some new app online. There is evidence that quality friendships can start online *if* they are worked on and sustained over time because what really matters is psychological, not physical, closeness (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, &

Schneider, 2013). (But, remember, social media, like Facebook, is probably not the best platform to go about it.) Or you could do some type of physical activity that people will want to do with you (like jogging) and talk to them about your life while doing it. It worked for that one hikikomori. The point is there are a lot of options out there. And the more you do it, the more likely you'll keep doing it. And the more you get used to communicating, the more likely you'll reach out to people for help when you need it. Furthermore, a good friend is probably likely to encourage you to go to psychotherapy if you really need it.

And if you make a mistake while communicating, that's okay. The important thing is that you learn from it. Apology if you need to. If they won't accept your apology, learn what you can from it and move on. But don't stop trying to communicate with people. Again, have a growth, not fixed, mindset. But to grow, you actually have to *do* what you are trying to improve at. If you want to grow, you have to get a little bit uncomfortable; you have to get out of your comfort zone for a bit.

Don't forget the other hikikomori study. It said that communicating is what probably caused the shut-in to change for the better as he said it allowed him to reflect on what he wanted in life (Yong & Kaneko, 2016). Keep in mind, the healing for that hikikomori came from either Skype chats or emails. So focus on increasing your communication, even if it is online. Furthermore, like the interviewers in the hikikomori study, it's probably best if you take a genuine interest in people first ("How are you feeling?") because that's how you get them to open up to you and become your friend. As what one of Stephen Covey's seven habits says, *Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood*. Or, as another self-help guru said, *if you want to be interesting, be interested*. If you want someone to listen and give space to your life story, you probably need to listen and give space to their life story first. But don't get caught up in comparing your life to theirs, like many do on social media. Just listen with an empathic ear.

So you don't necessarily have to have face-to-face interactions to heal your life. But what you do need is frequency and space. What you need is someone who will listen. What you need is to start talking to people about your life.

## **Hope**

Central to being happy is having hope. Actually, hope is one of the few ways you can train yourself to become happier. The literature follows the idea that once people develop goals and believe that they can achieve them, hope and positive emotions are created and sustained. Central to this is to avoid *false* hope syndrome. False hope syndrome often occurs when "one believes that changing their behavior is easy and the outcome of the change will be evidenced in a short period of time." This eventually creates disappointment and a sense of hopelessness, or what we have been calling learned helplessness. And hopelessness undermines happiness ("Well-being contributing factors," n.d.).

But there *is* hope. You have a structured plan to follow. If a hikikomori can heal, so can you. But change takes time. Change is a process. Don't create a false hope in your mind. Follow the plan and give it time. Find someone to talk to. Give it three months. Start reflecting on your life in a good, productive way. There is hope. You just need to stick to the process.

## **Conclusion**

While psychotherapy probably isn't the answer most CACs are looking for, you've probably known all along the need to talk to someone about your problem, the need to go to a professional, and that a quick fix can't ever compare to the slow process of change and self-discovery. Stephen Covey warns against seeking and using pop psychology. Instead, he says you should seek to find universal and timeless principles. Then to improve your life you must pay the price by *actually* doing them. The



codependent adult child has to realize that they always had the power to change the situation. But change won't come overnight.

Change takes time. The good news is there is a clear path to take. You don't have to worry about it or search for it anymore. Trust the process. A summer's worth of psychological work should be all that it takes. Find someone to talk to. Find a group or a therapist. But as much as talk therapy will help you to realize what your real life goals are and to put the important things first, only you can be the one to do them. Remember, what really made someone into a codependent adult child probably wasn't the narcissistic parent but, rather, the fact the child wasn't willing to ask for help from someone *outside* the relationship when they needed it. Don't let the stigma of talk therapy stop you now.

As the Urban Dictionary definition finished on: "wish[ing] things will change without them putting in the effort. They will remain the same – they are truly lost."

Go ask for help.

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